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# NEW ENGLAND ASSOCIATION OF TEACHERS OF ENGLISH

## REPORT OF THE STANDING COMMITTEE ON ENTRANCE REQUIREMENTS

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### HISTORICAL SKETCH OF THE JOINT OR NATIONAL CONFERENCE ON ENTRANCE REQUIREMENTS IN ENGLISH, WITH ESPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE CONFERENCE OF 1908

Any fair-minded teacher who has considered at all carefully the development of the study of English in the past twenty years must admit at the outset of any discussion that our present troubles, however difficult to meet, are far less complicated than those overcome. The distracting conditions incident to a lack of uniformity in college entrance requirements, conditions which seriously hampered effective class work in secondary schools, have been greatly improved by the establishment of a uniform entrance requirement. Moreover, the uncertainty attending the varying interpretation of this uniform requirement by the examiners of individual colleges has been practically obviated by the establishment of the College Entrance Examination Board. By these means much of the lack of definition which formerly made our teaching difficult has been remedied.

For these improved conditions, thanks are due principally to three agencies: the New England Commission of Colleges on Entrance Requirements, the National Education Association, and the Association of Colleges and Preparatory Schools of the Middle States and Maryland. In 1888 the New England Commission of Colleges, in its work of establishing some degree of

uniformity in entrance requirements, set a list of books for reading as the preparation for the examination in English. In going about this work, the commission used the method of investigation since employed in every important handling of entrance requirements—the now familiar “conference” made up of representatives from colleges and preparatory schools.

The plan finally adopted in 1892 by the National Education Association, after wide discussion of the whole confused subject of entrance requirements, was based upon this New England plan. This association appointed the now memorable Committee of Ten, to which it gave power to call conferences of persons whose position and reputation entitled them to be called experts in some one study in the preparatory schools, every section, interest, and school of thought to be represented. It was this method of inquiry which gave lasting value to the work of the committee.

The Conference on English met at Vassar College in December, 1892, and organized with Mr. Samuel Thurber as chairman, and Professor George L. Kittredge as secretary. Upon the principles laid down in the report of this conference have been based practically all subsequent efforts to systematize and unify work in English. Yet as we study the wise and far-reaching suggestions there embodied, the high standards erected, and contrast them with the results attained after fifteen years of conscientious effort to live up to these ideals, we wonder whether, by emphasizing too much certain suggestions, we have not blurred the intention of the whole. The conference, in delivering its report, must have wished to add, in self-defense, the words of Captain Cuttle: “The bearings of these remarks lies in the applications of ’em.” It may be worth while, at the outset of an effort to see clearly present conditions, to summarize at length the conclusions embodied in the report before passing to our “applications” of them.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>The order of this summary does not accord with that of the report; separated suggestions have been brought together, and the language is only in part that of the original. Nevertheless, it is believed that the changes made in arrangement and phrasing in no way misrepresent the position of the conference.

The main objects of the teaching of English in schools seem to be two: (1) to enable the pupil to understand the expressed thoughts of others and to give expression to thoughts of his own; (2) to cultivate a taste for reading, to give the pupil some acquaintance with good literature, and to furnish him with the means of extending that acquaintance. In composition work the pupil should from the earliest years be encouraged to furnish his own material, expressing his own thoughts in a natural way, the exercises to be practical rather than technical. As early as possible material for narration and description should be suggested by the pupil's observation or personal experience. Throughout the school course composition should be taught by unremitting practice accompanied by careful and appropriate criticism. Every thought which the pupil expresses, whether orally or on paper, should be regarded as a proper subject for criticism as to language. Thus every lesson in geography or mathematics may and should become a part of the pupil's training in English. There can be no more appropriate moment for a brief lesson in expression than the moment when the pupil has something which he is trying to express. Grammar and rhetoric should both be taught, but *in the main* incidentally and in close relation with the work of the pupil himself and the works he reads. Formal grammar should not be taught before the thirteenth year of the pupil's life; the main principles should then be laid down in a year's course of three hours a week. Formal rhetoric should be presented in a one-year elementary course in the third year of the high school, but the work done beforehand in composition should have been such as to make such a course a codification of principles already supplied in practice. Especial care should be taken that rhetoric is not studied by itself and for itself. The conference "does not contemplate an examination in formal rhetoric for admission to college."

In the high-school work in literature the pupil should read certain masterpieces not fewer in number than the list set by the New England Commission; such books each to represent so far as possible some period, tendency, or type of literature, the whole

number to represent with as few gaps as possible the course of English literature from the Elizabethan to the present day; of these a considerable number to be of a kind to be read by the student cursorily and by himself; a limited number may be read in the classroom under the direction of the teacher. Parallel and subsidiary reading is to be encouraged, and the investigation of pertinent questions in literary history and criticism. Frequent tests should be given upon the books read alone and upon the parallel reading and the investigation above mentioned, the objects being threefold: (1) to bring out the pupil's knowledge; (2) to test his ability to methodize his knowledge; (3) to test his ability to write clearly and concisely. The conference "doubts the wisdom of requiring for admission to colleges set essays (e. g., on the books prescribed)—essays the chief purpose of which is to test the pupil's ability to write English. It believes there are serious theoretical and practical objections to estimating a student's power to write a language on the basis of a theme composed not for the sake of expounding something that he knows or thinks, but merely for the sake of showing his ability to write." The alternative suggested is questions upon subsidiary reading in literary history or upon definite passages taken from the books read.

History of English literature is to be taught incidentally; mechanical use of manuals of literature is to be avoided. In the fourth year of the high school an attempt may be made to give the pupil a view of our literature as a whole, but this instruction should accompany a chronologically arranged sequence of authors. The history of the English language cannot perhaps at present (1893) be taught extensively in the high schools, but the conference recommends (1) a study of the history and geography of the English race so far as these illustrate the development of the language; (2) phonetics, to give a clear idea of the general causes giving English the peculiar value of its vowel symbols; (3) word-composition; (4) elements of English vocabulary to illustrate the political, social, intellectual, and religious development of the race; (5) changes in the meaning of words, to be taught incidentally.

The high school may deal with dialects and literary language and with decay of inflections.

Perhaps, to emphasize the wisdom of the conference it would have been well to put the last group of recommendations in a less conspicuous position. To those of us who have wrestled with the problem of imparting knowledge of the most rudimentary kind to the average high-school pupil, the ideal suggested in the above list makes us long for the official recognition of what Lord Acton calls, "a rational possible end, limited by many antagonistic claims, and confined to what is reasonable, practicable, and just." Yet it is surely clear that the intention visible everywhere in the report is that teaching should not be divorced from common-sense, that the teacher should be the judge of what is possible under existing conditions. One may add, moreover, that branches called by even such high-sounding names may be bent down by a helpful hand until even a very small person may gather the fruit.

It was clearly intended that the pupil should learn to read books primarily because a reading habit is a pleasant and profitable thing. This fact is apparent in spite of the suggestion not summarized, that references should be traced and difficult passages understood. It was as evidently intended that composition should be a natural expression of the pupil's thought, not a rehash of the books read. It was nowhere assumed or set down that examinations should be confined to a printed list of books, or that proficiency to express himself on the subject-matter of these books should be the test of the pupil's skill in composition. It is a consideration of these things which leads one to wonder whether in a search for a "rational possible end," certain suggestions of the committee have not been overemphasized, with a result quite different from that which was designed.

Such were the principles laid down by the report of the Vassar Conference of the Committee of Ten; it remained for some agency to put these ideals into operation, or, at least, to make choice among them, to hit upon some plan which should offer a definite working basis for uniformity. Such action was taken in 1893 by the Association of the Colleges and Preparatory

Schools of the Middle States and Maryland, the third agency to which teachers of English are indebted. This association, at the suggestion of President Seth Low, appointed a committee to investigate the question of uniform entrance requirements in English. This committee, composed of five college and five preparatory school representatives, met in New York in February, 1894, and sent out circulars of inquiry to about one hundred colleges and four hundred preparatory schools in New England and the middle states. The answers brought out the facts that the schools demanded a substantially uniform standard, and declared that, whatever course the middle states adopted, it must at least not conflict with the procedure in New England.

As a result of the desire for co-operation with New England, the first joint conference on entrance requirements in English, which met in Philadelphia in May, 1894, was composed of the committee of the Middle States Association, of delegates from the New England Commission of Colleges (Professor Winchester, Professor Cook, and Dean Briggs), and of delegates from the New England Association of Colleges and Preparatory Schools (Mr. Tetlow and Mr. Collar). This Conference of 1894 and the succeeding Conference of 1895 prepared the way for the adoption of the uniform requirements which, with slight variations, have since been retained. The action taken, which was based on the suggestions of the Vassar Conference of the Committee of Ten, was conservative, practical, and definite. The list of books required by the New England Commission of Colleges was adopted, but the books were arranged in two groups, one for reading, one for study and practice. In accordance with the demand of the schools for a stable requirement, the list was fixed for three years. Rhetoric was pronounced "useful, but too hard and inflexible for a good examination test;" correction of "bad English," it was voted, should be excluded from the examinations.

It will be noted that the work of this conference and of succeeding conferences is based upon one assumption, the use of a fixed list of English masterpieces as a basis of the work in literature and composition. No matter what the changes in the

makeup of the conferences, no matter how diverse, in the course of years, were the interests represented, this assumption remained the same. It dominated the entire treatment of the study of English and brought forth a distinct method both of study and of examination. This method possessed conveniences that for some years showed as real advantages. The merits of system, of a fixed quantity of work, of a task which, in one aspect, at least, was perfectly definite, the advantages of giving a student a first-hand acquaintance with literature, of a clearly recognized body of subjects for theme work, of convenient texts to work with—all these were apparent at the first. Nevertheless, as the years went on and divergent interests were represented in the conferences, the difficulties of adjustment under the system became onerous. In 1895 a third section of the country was represented by a delegate from the Conference of the Teachers of English of the north-central states; in 1897 delegates from the Association of Colleges and Preparatory Schools in the southern states were admitted. The conference at that time consisted of the delegates from the middle states and Maryland, from the Southern Association of Schools and Colleges, from the North Central Association of Teachers of English, and of delegates from two New England bodies—the New England Association of Colleges and Preparatory Schools, and the New England Commission of Colleges on Entrance Examinations. This constituency maintained itself in all the conferences up to 1905, except that in 1902 the delegates from the north-central section were sent by the recently formed Association of Colleges and Preparatory Schools. In all the conferences up to 1905 action was directed mainly toward clearer definition of requirements and careful revision of the lists for required reading. Even a casual glance through the list from 1895 to 1905 will show how steadily the sorting-out process went on, and will suggest how consistently the objections of teachers resulted in the dropping of certain books.

In looking back over these years, one sees clearly the value of these conferences. The unifying force, the responsibility voluntarily assumed by the men who composed them, the high character of the delegates, the dignity of the interests represented



—all these things make of great importance this movement started by the foresight and energy of the Association of Colleges and Preparatory Schools of the Middle States and Maryland. In a time of confusion and inaction this association acted, and acted with promptness and high intelligence, an intelligence in nothing more conspicuously shown than in securing the co-operation of other bodies important in the educational interests of the country.

In 1905, however, the conference lost something of its representative character by the absence of the delegates from the New England Commission on Entrance Examinations, this commission having, since the successful organization of the College Entrance Examination Board, suspended its work. The representatives from the Commission of Colleges had from the first been a constituent part of the conferences and had brought to the movement the high dignity of the colleges represented by them. It was this Conference of 1905 that adopted the elastic "open list" of forty books for reading in place of the definite ten of the former requirements. This change and the resulting action in New England merely emphasize the difficulties of reconciling the conflicting interests heretofore represented. Those parts of the country where examinations were of little importance had raised a cry of relief from the restricted list of books; it was they who had asked for an "open" list that should provide a greater range of books for the jaded teacher to choose from. The examining colleges, on the other hand, had found that the system had a deadly effect on the training in composition, and on the ability of students to understand and appreciate literature. In their judgment the "open list" merely increased the difficulties of examination without in any way remedying the fundamental objection. This change, then, made in 1905, to satisfy the demands of the non-examining constituency, made the discontent of the other constituency still more active, especially since the important examining interests had had no part in bringing about the change.

The dissatisfaction that was felt in this part of the country at the modifications made by the National Conference of 1905 soon

took form in the organization of a Conference of the New England Colleges on Entrance Requirements in English. This body was the legitimate successor of the Commission of New England Colleges on Entrance Examinations, which had suspended its activities, and it represented as authoritatively the interests of the examining colleges. The immediate result of this action was that most of the colleges made important modifications in the list presented by the National Conference of 1905, and the long-desired uniformity became, as far as New England was concerned, a thing of the past. This body prepared recommendations of a radical character to be presented to the Conference of 1908, the general tenor of which was that less emphasis should be put on minute study of texts and more emphasis on composition. Further evidence of dissatisfaction was given by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, which threw over altogether the list of books and adopted a requirement of work in composition on non-literary subjects, with "sight questions" to test a student's power of understanding and appreciating literature. The final expression of the desire of New England that its peculiar needs have more effective representation in the National Conference was the action of the New England Association of Teachers of English, which appointed delegates to go to New York at the time of the meeting of the Conference of 1908, and to make application for membership on behalf of this association.

The presence at this Conference of 1908, which was held in New York on February 21 and 22, of delegates from these two new bodies from New England, in addition to the regular delegates from the New England Association of Colleges and Preparatory Schools, and the application for membership made by these two bodies brought out strikingly the peculiarities of organization that have been inherent in the Joint or National Conference from the beginning. It is a voluntary association composed of delegates from associations which are themselves voluntary, and which, moreover, concern themselves with English only as it is one of many matters that come under their care. It has therefore no constitution, no permanent officers or organi-

zation, and no authority. The result of its deliberations is expressed in a vote that a certain requirement "be recommended to the constituent bodies for adoption." This is the extent of its power. So long, however, as the New England colleges were represented on the conference through delegates from their Commission on Entrance Examinations, they accepted its report at once, and confirmed its action as substantially their requirement. Naturally, therefore, in this part of the country, if not elsewhere, the action of the conference had weight. The organization representing the New England colleges at New York last February was, as has just been noted, to all intents and purposes the legitimate successor of the Commission of Colleges on Entrance Examinations; yet it had to appear as an outsider, and to ask for admission as if the institutions that it represented had never had any standing in the conference. After considerable discussion the delegates representing the New England colleges were admitted—or re-admitted. As for the delegates from the New England Association of Teachers of English, they were invited to take part in the deliberations, but were not given the right to vote. (It is hardly necessary to add that your delegates were made heartily welcome and treated with the utmost courtesy.) These instances are cited to show that, owing to the intermittent organization which the conference maintains, its composition when it meets must be more or less subject to temporary questions of expediency. It is true that, with three delegations from New England on its hands, the Conference of 1908 had had a perplexing problem to deal with. That, however, is not the point. The significant thing is that, in such circumstances it had absolutely no guidance from established and recognized principles. By way of making a good end to this aspect of the conference, let it be noted that at this meeting the necessary preliminary steps were taken for remedying this uncertain condition of affairs.

From the beginning of the sessions of this conference, it was manifest that a desire for change was in the air. The individual members in their daily experience as teachers had already been brought face to face with the fact that the system was not work-

ing itself out in the way designed by its initiators, and they believed that the time had come to make a new statement as to what constitute the fundamentals in the study and teaching of English. It very naturally came to pass, therefore, that an agreement was made to fix a list of books for only one year (1912), to adjourn for a year, and to appoint a committee of five which should investigate the whole question of the entrance requirement in English and report to the individual members of the conference before the adjourned meeting. This action, it is hardly necessary to say, is of the greatest possible importance. Of this committee of five Professor Cross of Yale is chairman. With regard to the list of books selected for 1912, the only points worth noting are that the number of books to be read is reduced from ten to nine, and that three of the *Idylls of the King* are introduced as a welcome alternative to the group of Milton's shorter poems in the list of books for study and practice. Also, from this group "Lycidas" is omitted.

This, however, is merely a record of the votes passed. The value of the meetings was in the frank expression of opinion from men in different parts of the country as to the present condition of things. The belief that the time had come when the conference might propose to its constituent bodies a step greatly in advance of its former action was put with most weight by Professor Scott of the University of Michigan. Thanks to his initiative, the conference discussed with entire candor two propositions—the complete separation of literature and composition, the framing of a requirement in literature which should do away with a fixed list of books. The purpose of the discussion was not so much to reach a result as to indicate the line which the investigations of its committee might profitably take. In other words, from the work of this committee the conference should be able to decide whether the time has come when the old assumption of a list of required books may be dropped and a new requirement worked out based on the principle that composition and literature are distinct things, and that in the study of literature the storing up for examination purposes of information concerning certain books should be minimized, if not altogether

done away with. In the opinion of one of your delegates, the informal views of the members of the conference were favorable to some such a new basis. Further than this they did not commit themselves; it was necessary first to know that such a basis is practical and that it will commend itself as logical and necessary to the teachers of English throughout the country. That information it is the work of the committee of the conference to supply.

The significant thing about the National Conference of 1908, then, is this. It has opened the door for change, and has appealed to the country to find out whether change is desirable, and if so, what change is desirable. Our New England Association of Teachers of English represents a body of opinion characteristic of a community that lives—for better or for worse—under the examination system. Any expression of opinion which those here present may give today will be of value to that committee and to the conference. Here wisdom will be heard and heeded, and it need not cry aloud.

One point remains to be made. Any new scheme that may be adopted must be, like the old scheme, a working agreement that will satisfy the two diverse interests that are represented in the conference. If, however, the new agreement is not to share the fate of the old, it must have some other justification than that of being principally a convenient method of securing uniformity. To endure, it must be grounded on solid educational principles. Whatever merits the old system had as a suggested course of reading, those advantages were largely lost in this part of the country because the examining colleges found it difficult to adjust to their examination system. We all realized the unsatisfactory condition of things, and uttered protests whenever opportunity offered. The guidance given by the Vassar Conference of the Committee of Ten had proved inadequate to our needs, and had been lost sight of. We were in deep woods, bewildered by the crisscrossing of individual blazed trails. Under such circumstances progress was nearly impossible. Here at last, however, is the opportunity for re-orientation. It is our own fault if we do not make the most of it. What we teachers in school and

college, working together, must now do is to frame a new statement of the ideals that should be the basis of preparatory work in English. Such a statement should be inclusive enough to serve as a standard to the men who set examination papers, to the men who edit texts, to the men who fix courses of study, and to all of us in our daily work in the classroom. It should serve as a standard but it should not go so far as to concern itself with details. If some such statement of ideals can be made, it will mean that the colleges, on the one hand, are willing to give up some points on which hitherto they have insisted; and that the schools, on the other hand, accept the responsibilities of a higher standard of work. With a common understanding as to what things are fundamental, the delegates representing New England colleges and schools can, at the meeting of the conference next year, stand unitedly for a requirement that, besides being practical, squares with what is sound in principle.

Plainly, within the next twelvemonth there is much work to be done. Setting aside such important questions as what constitutes a fair examination paper and what constitutes a good edition of a text—and as regards both examination papers and annotated texts of the last fifteen years perhaps the safest word of characterization is the epithet *experimental*—setting these aside, we find ourselves called to the large task of formulating our ideals with a view to action. To take part in such work is in accord with the traditions of the New England Association of Teachers of English. Your Executive Committee, therefore, proposes that one of its standing committees take up a single aspect of the large question, and report to you on it next November. As the Standing Committee of last year indicated in its report, it is obviously inexpedient for this association, a body with no official effective authority, to plan a course of study for either elementary or secondary schools. Work of that sort has already been undertaken in many places by the proper bodies. It has appeared, however, that we might do what no such body with a special task before it is required to do—that is to say, frame a general statement of the principles on which any second-

ary course of study should be based. By so doing, we should be performing that part in the larger task for which we are especially suited. Such a report from the association will be a fitting contribution to the work that must be done, if the conference that meets in 1909 is to act wisely and well.